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SNIE 2-4-61
31 August 1961

SPECIAL NATIONAL INTELLIGENCE ESTIMATE

REACTIONS TO CERTAIN US MEASURES
IN THE BERLIN CRISIS

- Bloc and other reactions to a complete blockade of the Communist Bloc
- Reactions to a regional blockade
- Reactions to US repossession of Soviet-operated lend-lease merchant ships



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Central Intelligence Agency

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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY

31 August 1961

SUBJECT: SNIE 2-4-61: REACTIONS TO CERTAIN US MEASURES
IN THE BERLIN CRISIS

THE PROBLEM

To estimate Soviet, Chinese Communist, and Free World reactions to total naval blockade of, or other maritime control measures imposed on, the countries of the Sino-Soviet Bloc in response to Soviet restrictions on access to West Berlin.^{1/}

^{1/} For discussion of Communist Bloc and other reactions to other maritime and economic pressures, see SNIE 2-61, "Soviet and Other Reactions to Various Courses of Action Regarding Berlin," dated 13 June 1961, TOP SECRET, Limited Distribution, and SNIE 2-3-61, "Probable Soviet Reaction to a Western Embargo," dated 18 July 1961, TOP SECRET, Limited Distribution.

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ASSUMPTIONS

A. It is assumed that in response to severe Soviet pressure on Allied rights in West Berlin, such as restrictions governing access which the Allies considered unacceptable, the US undertakes to establish a Western blockade of the Sino-Soviet Bloc.

B. In the discussion of Bloc reactions, except in a section specifically devoted to considerations of limited maritime controls (paragraphs 12ff), it is assumed that the US, together with as many of its Allies as would agree to participate, has established a naval blockade of the outlets to the Baltic and Black Seas, of Soviet ports in the Barents and White Seas and the Pacific Ocean, and of Chinese Communist and North Vietnamese and North Korean ports, preventing passage of ships of all powers to and from Bloc ports.

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THE ESTIMATE

A COMPLETE BLOCKADE

1. Reactions of NATO and Japan. We believe that the majority of NATO members would be extremely reluctant to sanction a Western naval blockade which, however justified, would in their eyes constitute an act of war. Should the Soviet provocation be sufficiently great, there might be some support for a blockade as offering a means of striking back other than by Western military action in the Berlin area or the immediate initiation of general war. However, there would still be strong and probably overriding objections to the imposition of a blockade on the grounds that a blockade, instead of forcing the Soviets to back down, would probably lead to new Soviet reprisals against West Berlin or against NATO countries and would further increase the risk of general war. These objections would probably be strongly held

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by -- among others -- the UK, Denmark, and Turkey, whose ^{2/} cooperation would be all but essential to the enterprise.

2. If a decision to blockade should be instituted following the failure of an attempt to obtain NATO agreement, the political consequences for NATO unity would be very serious and could be disastrous to the alliance. Efforts to secure the cooperation of Japan, which would be essential for a fully effective Pacific blockade, would almost certainly fail.

3. Soviet Reactions. Assuming, however, that a Western naval blockade could be established, it would present a serious challenge to Soviet prestige. Probably the most important considerations underlying the Soviet reaction would be the objectives of reasserting its power while continuing to try to avoid general

2/ The Director for Intelligence, Joint Staff, believes that the tone of paragraph 1 is entirely too pessimistic and that this excessive pessimism is reflected throughout the Estimate. Sufficient weight is not given to the circumstances which must exist at the time the blockade would be applied. Considering that the blockade would be imposed only as a result of "severe Soviet pressure" and as "a means of striking back other than immediate initiation of general war," he believes that considerably more NATO and world support of such action would be forthcoming than is indicated in this Estimate.

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war. While there would be some economic dislocation within the Bloc, economic considerations would not be so great as to play a significant role in determining the Soviet reaction. The Soviet leaders would feel under some compulsion to defend the interests of their Satellites and Asian Allies. Communist China would press them to take strong measures. However, the chief motive of their reaction would be the preservation of the image of the USSR in the world at large as a great power which could not be coerced by naval controls imposed by other powers.

4. The Soviet leaders would, therefore, seek to exert increasingly strong pressures. We believe that they would not react to the imposition of a blockade by initiating general war, but they would immediately demand a cessation of the blockade and undertake initiatives designed to compel the Western Powers to do so. In attempting to reassert their power, the Soviet leaders would certainly threaten participating countries such as Turkey and Denmark. At the least the Soviets would probably cut off all Western access to West Berlin, if this had not already been done.

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5. In addition, the Soviets would almost certainly respond initially by ordering their merchant ships at sea into close friendly or neutral ports, and instructing merchant ships already in port to remain there. However, they would also seek a prompt test of the blockade, and they would encourage and press neutrals to do likewise. We believe that initial Soviet tests of the blockade would occur in areas within the operating radius of Soviet naval surface and air forces where the Soviets would hope to prevail, and when a sizable political or propaganda gain might be anticipated. Under such circumstances the Soviet forces almost certainly would not avoid combat, and as their reaction increased in intensity they would use naval surface ships, submarines, and aircraft, as appropriate. They might announce a counterblockade against the blockading countries and threaten to enforce it both with their large submarine and mining capabilities. It is also possible that at this stage the Soviets would encourage diversions in the Far East. During this series of measures and countermeasures, the danger of escalation to general war would always exist.

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6. At the same time, as these developments progressed, the Soviets would of course recognize that the situation was moving very close to all-out war, and that the blockade was a substantial indication of the willingness of the US and its principal allies to run grave risks in defense of their Berlin position. We think that the Soviets would be impressed by this demonstration of the Western attitude, and they would probably accompany their forceful countermeasures by moves designed to avert a general conflict. Almost certainly they would reiterate their willingness to negotiate. They would probably stimulate and encourage world opinion, which would surely be clamoring for both the principal contestants to come to terms. They would probably agree to a reference of the matter to the UN, where they would expect to enjoy considerable advantages. Their negotiating position, however, would continue to depend on their estimate of the intentions of the Western Powers -- this we cannot predict. Although they might adopt positions designed to alleviate the immediate crisis, we do not think that they would abandon their essential objectives with respect to Berlin.

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7. Chinese Communist Reactions. The Chinese Communists would feel the economic effects of a blockade, would deeply resent it, and would resist it to the limit of their capability. The Chinese leaders would press the Soviets to react strongly, and it is possible that they would with Soviet concurrence instigate new diversionary moves in the Far East.

8. World Reactions. The general reaction in the rest of the world, including almost all neutral countries, would be adverse to a blockade.^{3/} Regardless of justification of a blockade in US eyes, the vast majority of people would not see sufficient relation between such a measure and the strong Soviet pressure on Berlin to justify the measure. They would regard it as a move broadening the area of conflict to large parts of the world, and dangerously raising the risks of general war. Even those who favor or at least do not oppose the Western position on Berlin would for the most part doubt the efficacy and fear the consequences of a blockade.

^{3/} The Director of Intelligence, Joint Staff, believes this reaction is only probable. See his footnote to paragraph 1.

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9. Neutral and some allied opinion would consider that the West had weakened its moral and legal arguments on "access rights" by itself denying presently accepted rights of access and commerce among nations not officially at war. Nations jealous over newly won sovereignty, and not without memory of colonial means of pacification, would be inclined to sympathize with the Soviet position even where previously they had not, or had harbored roughly equal wariness toward the Western and the Communist camps.

10. A number of neutral, and some pro-Western, countries would stand to lose from a blockade. Soviet and other Bloc economic aid and trade are at present significant elements in the economies of the UAR, India, Guinea, and Indonesia. In addition, Cuba would be hit very hard by the blockade, especially in regard to its supply of oil.

11. In sum, the opposition to a blockade in the world at large would probably be sufficient to assure UN condemnation of the blockade, and help build pressures in and on the Western Powers to negotiate a solution to the Berlin issue and abandon the blockade.

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LIMITED MARITIME CONTROL MEASURES

12. Regional Blockade. The US and its Allies might agree to cut off Bloc access to specific areas, such as the Caribbean, by seizing or diverting Bloc ships or Bloc cargo under other flags. The Soviets would consider the affront to their prestige as little less than in the case of a complete blockade. Their reactions would probably be vigorous, and they would probably in retaliation institute comparable restrictive actions where they found it possible. Their reactions in Berlin and perhaps elsewhere would probably be as strong as in the case of a complete blockade. The other countries where shipping and trade were affected would surely protest the action strongly. Opinion in the world in general would be less strongly hostile than to a complete blockade, but the chief objections would not be significantly moderated: concern over the consequences of broadened as well as heightened tension, and failure to see an adequate relationship to the stated justification and objective. The UN would probably be called upon to condemn the action, and would probably do so.

13. Seizure of Lend-Lease Ships. One measure which might be taken would be a US attempt to repossess the 84 Soviet-operated ships

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provided under Lend-Lease, to which the US still holds title. These ships are among the largest which the Soviets operate and they carry a significant part of its overseas cargo. The Soviets would probably protest the procedure strongly, and would take steps to protect these ships from seizure, probably through keeping them out of areas where they could be seized. While the Soviets would find the measure politically embarrassing and irritating, they probably would not react strongly to what would appear to be an ineffective response to their pressures on Berlin. World opinion would probably not be greatly excited by the move, though many neutrals and some allies would consider the measure as ineffective and inappropriate. If this were any important part of the response to heavy Soviet pressures on Berlin, Germany and our NATO Allies in general would be discouraged by what they would consider a weak and tangential response. The US legal position would be good, although the invocation of long unexercised residual rights for a retaliatory purpose might blunt recognition of the validity of the US claims.

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